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ABSTRACT

While an extensive vocabulary in English as a second language (ESL) is important for effective communication, quantity of vocabulary alone does not guarantee effectiveness. Vocabulary quality, as contrasted with quantity, can make a great difference in the extent to which one can successfully participate in a community of native English speakers. Some commonly neglected vocabulary needs of ESL students include: ways of expressing meaning other than through precise lexical items, such as defining vocabulary and phrases to circumvent exact words, and the use of near synonyms; skills in exploiting lexical patterning, or the ways in which lexical items are related as in synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms; and knowledge of how to inform the speaker when and why the student does not understand, and to have something explained or repeated. Exercises can be developed to fill each of these needs and to enable ESL students to interact with native speakers with greater ease, confidence, and success. (MSE)

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SOME NEGLECTED VOCABULARY NEEDS OF ESL STUDENTS

Tom Richards

Most ESL teachers and students seem to believe that the larger one's vocabulary is the more communicatively competent one is likely to be. An extensive vocabulary is undoubtedly invaluable for effective communication, but it may not be adequate. This paper discusses some important areas of vocabulary which are often neglected in ESL instruction and offers some suggestions for helping students make their vocabularies -- and hence communicative abilities -- more adequate. A bibliography of some useful references is provided for teachers interested in meeting the wide range of students' vocabulary needs.

ON VOCABULARY NEEDS OF ESL STUDENTS

The recent emphasis on the communicative language needs of ESL students (see Yule, this volume) has given rise to much discussion and controversy. While there has been general agreement that a "communicative approach" to language teaching can give us insights into students' language needs, there remains disagreement as to what exactly these needs are and how they may be most effectively met. This is especially the case with vocabulary.

The importance of an extensive and well-developed vocabulary is emphasized by Judd (1978), who stresses that extensive vocabulary development should begin at the beginning levels of instruction. This argument is based on what Baxter (1980) calls the "quantitative" view of vocabulary. According to this view, the more words students know the more likely it is

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that they will be able to successfully comprehend and convey intended messages. This quantitative view seems quite accurate until we make a distinction between the spoken and written modes of language.

As Brown (1978) points out, one important distinction between spoken and written language can be made in terms of time and hearer feedback. Obviously, speakers usually have very little time to search for a particular lexical item when interacting with one another, but can rely on the situational context, including paralinguistic clues, non-verbal communication, cooperation of the listener, and feedback. In contrast, written language lacks the situational context of speaker-hearer interaction, so that lexical explicitness and precision become more important. Because of this distinction, a large vocabulary seems to be more important for communicative competence in the written mode than in the spoken. Moreover, in spoken language the quality of one's vocabulary may be just as important as --if not more important than -- the quantity. This is not to say that in spoken language an extensive vocabulary is not useful, but rather that it might not contain particular words and phrases and related skills necessary for effective and natural communication. So let us focus on these often neglected vocabulary items and skills which can greatly help ESL students to be more communicatively competent.

SOME NEGLECTED VOCABULARY NEEDS OF ESL STUDENTS

Ways of Expressing Meaning Other than through Precise Lexical Items

First of all, ESL students should know that in spoken English meaning is conveyed not only through the use of precise lexical items but in other ways as well. Native speakers use a range of devices to convey meaning when the precise word does not come to mind: near synonynms, more general words, pauses, expressions such as more or less, and phrases such as you know and I dunno, which indicate to hearers that they should increase their involvement in interpreting the message (Baxter 1980). As

for "general words," Baxter writes that students should know "defining" vocabulary such as part, way, thing, stuff, kind, and idea, since all speakers -- including native speakers of a language -- cannot always immediately recall precise lexical items for production, even when they know them well. The student who does not know the word for vending machine, for example, can use a defining phrase such as machine that you put money in to get a coke or something. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English provides a list of 2,000 defining vocabulary items to which teachers and students can turn for help in identifying common words used in defining. As Baxter argues, ESL teachers should teach students how such devices are employed and devise activities in which they are needed. Such activities can promote the development of "manipulative skills" referred to by Yule (this volume).

There are many different activities which can be devised which teach ESL students to manipulate English to convey meaning in the various ways that native speakers do. One possibility is to present authentic conversations either live or taped (such as those in James 1980) -- and ask students to identify the types of devices mentioned above. Discussion can focus on the purpose various devices can serve (see Nelson, this volume), sociolinguistic appropriateness, etc. Or, students can be asked to desribe an unfamiliar object or narrate an event, recording the speech on tape. It is likely that some meaning will be expressed unnaturally or unsuccessfully; this can lead to discussion of how the students might have performed differently, with special attention to the use of defining vocabulary, the use of near synonyms (perhaps qualified by words like more or less), and so on. Equipped with some new devices for conveying meaning, students can repeat the same tasks or try different ones.

Lexical Patterning

Another aspect of vocabulary which has gone almost completely unnoticed in ESL instruction is the skill of recognizing and being able to exploit lexical patterning (McCarthy 1984). By this McCarthy means that students need to learn how lexical

items are related "above sentence level, across conversational turn boundaries and within the broad framework of discourse organization"(1984:14). According to this view, lexical relations such as synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy above the clause or sentence level play an important part in communication. Thus, ESL students need to learn to anticipate and recognize the many ways in which vocabulary items relate to one another and to make use of lexical relations in producing more natural and effective language. McCarthy offers many useful suggestions for teaching lexical patterning. In a guessing game, students work in pairs with one student trying to guess in as much detail as possible what is in a picture seen only by the other student. The student with the picture can give only two clues. The example is from McCarthy (1984:17):

Clues: piece of furniture, office furniture

A: I've got a picture of a piece of furniture
B: Is it a bed?
A: No, it's office furniture
B: Is it a desk/cupboard? etc.

Another activity is one in which students are asked to respond to utterances in the ways specified in the following example (from McCarthy 1984:19).

a. Agree, with synonym:

A: He was very strange.
B: Yes, very odd

b. Agree, with antonym:

A: Joe didn't stick to the subject.
B: He wandered off too much.

c. Disagree, with antonym:

A: A really gripping film.
B: I thought it was dull.

d. Intensify:

A: It's a hot day.
B: Sweltering.

e. Reduce intensity:

A: Was he furious?
B: He was cross.

f. Agree, with more general word:

A: The cat is great company.
B: All pets are.

g. Agree, with more specific word:

A: Books are badly printed nowadays.
B: Especially paperbacks.

Informing the Speaker about Why You Don't Understand

Finally, another neglected vocabulary need of ESL students is for language they can use to inform their interlocutors when they don't understand a message or a part thereof. Non-native speakers may fail to understand because of particular vocabulary items, confusing grammar, softness or length of utterance, or even their own inattentiveness. Therefore, when students request a second opportunity to comprehend a message, they

should inform speakers, insofar as they are able, why they don't understand. That is to say, ESL students should learn words and phrases such as the following (used with appropriate politeness):

repeat the first part
say it again
say it more slowly
rephrase that last part
speak up
say it another way

In addition, students need to practice the skill of forming WH questions in which they repeat what they have understood and replace with a WH word the part of a message they have missed:

Native speaker: Looks like it's going to hail.
Non-native speaker: It's going to what? I don't think I know that word.

The point is that ESL students need to know that it is their responsiblity to inform native speakers as to the nature of their difficulties in comprehending a message. If they understand this, and if they learn to do it, they will succeed in making repairs of misunderstandings easier.

Related to this is a homework assignment in which students are asked to make phone calls requesting some useful information. For examples, teachers can take advantage of their students' desire to acquire information about subscribing to the newspaper, attending a certain performance, or setting up an appointment. The next day the students can report to the class about the information they received, explain whether they had difficulty understanding the speakers, and discuss the language they used to remedy any communication problems.

CONCLUSION

As should be clear from the above discussion, the quality of one's vocabulary knowledge -- as opposed to simply quantity

of vocabulary -- can make a tremendous difference in the extent to which one can successfully participate in a community of native English speakers. Knowing the types of words, phrases, and skills presented above will enable ESL students to interact with native speakers with more confidence and greater ease, more naturally, and ultimately with more success than they could without them. We owe it to our ESL students to help them make their vocabularies -- and hence communicative abilities -- more adequate. Below is a bibliography of some useful references for teachers interested in meeting the wide range of ESL students' vocabulary needs.

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